This introductory chapter outlines the underpinnings of this journey through the transformational impact that the Diploma in Liberal Studies has had on its graduates and their communities. It briefly introduces the Diploma and the locations in which it is offered and presents the methodology used to conduct the study, before unpacking the structure of subsequent chapters. These will be published individually, at regular intervals, delving into the elements of the conceptual model created by the analysis of the 136 interviews with graduates in five countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya and Malawi.

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1 Introduction

In May 2021 the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) published a report entitled, Thinking Higher and Beyond: Perspectives on the futures of higher education to 2050. The report highlights that the mission of universities in the years leading up to 2050 is to take active responsibility in the development of the potential of all humans; promoting well-being and sustainability oriented towards justice, solidarity and human rights, respecting culture and diversity, creating space for dialogue and forging collaborations between local and global communities and with other levels of education, other social institutions and the economy. On the other hand, another recent report, Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis, from UNHCR (2019), states that the international community is missing out on the chance to educate young refugees to prevent future conflicts and build more resilient, sustainable and peaceful societies. At the core of this global challenge is a lack of recognition of higher education as a humanitarian priority: according to UNHCR only 3% of refugees have access to higher education, compared to the 27% of the global population (UNHCR, 2019). As the same report acknowledges, for refugees the access to higher education “is the surest road to recovering a sense of purpose and dignity after the trauma of displacement.” (p.5). The empowering benefits of higher education for refugees are evident at both individual and community level: higher-level education turns students into leaders, and it harnesses the creativity, energy and idealism of refugee youth and young adults. By doing so, it casts them in the mould of role models, developing critical skills for decision-making, amplifying their voices and enabling rapid generational change (UNHCR 2019). Furthermore, the prospect of gaining access to higher education serves as a strong incentive to complete primary and secondary levels of school. Higher education is also an instrument of protection in refugee crisis contexts, and it plays a vital role in helping to develop the human and social capital necessary for rebuilding lives and communities (Gladwell et al. 2016).

JWL’s goal is to address this global challenge by providing equitable high-quality tertiary learning to people and communities at the margins of societies - be it through poverty, location, lack of opportunity, conflict or forced displacement – so all can contribute their knowledge and voices to the global community of learners and together foster hope to create a more peaceful and humane world. The first programme offered by JWL in 2010 was the Diploma in Liberal Studies, in collaboration with Regis University (US). This report aims to demonstrate the transformative impact that higher education can bring to the individuals and their communities, through the voices of the Diploma graduates. The goal of this study was to listen to the voices of Diploma graduates, so as to understand the lived impact of their education and how it has transformed ‘the margins’. We talked to 136 graduates who studied in Kenya, Malawi, Afghanistan, Iraq and Jordan, recorded more than 176 hours of interviews and gained insight – from them, from their experiences, from their own narratives – into the benefits that higher education brought to their lives and those of the people in their communities.

The following sections aims at briefly introducing the Diploma in Liberal Studies, its mode of delivery, the locations in which it has been offered, and presenting the
methodology of the study and the research participants. Finally, the structure of the report is introduced a structure that follows the developed conceptual model, from the acquisition of key knowledge and skills to the nurturing of existential competences for building self and community empowerment. We have decided to publish the 7 chapters of the report separately throughout the course of Summer and beginning of Fall 2021, to take our readers through this journey of discovery of how higher education in general, and Liberal Studies in particular, do make a difference and transform the lives of underserved communities around the globe. We hope you will enjoy this exploration that will lead us to discover the lived experience of the young people who took the opportunity to study with JWL and agreed to share it with us.

Figure 1: Countries in which the Diploma in Liberal Studies is offered
2 The Diploma in Liberal Studies

The Diploma in Liberal Studies, offered in collaboration with Regis University (US), has been running since 2010 and is the first academic programme offered by JWL. In September 2020, out of the total of 1,073 students enrolled, 305 were still active in the programme and expected to finish by end of 2021; 335 had withdrawn, which includes some who have been resettled; and 433 students had successfully graduated. With a foreseen completion rate over 60% this is a very successful programme, also in comparison with other blended online learning programmes in Europe and the United States, which have completion rates that vary a lot but is around 50% (Benetos & Gagnière, 2018).

At the core of the programme, like every programme offered by JWL, is a blended online learning approach, deemed crucial to implement two key components of the Ignatian educational philosophy: companionship and guidance, and to adapt the Ignatian model to students at the margins. Companionship and guidance are promoted through community learning centres, where students are accompanied by a local facilitator and work in groups, but are also integrated at a global level, with international online faculty teaching the courses and promoting discussion and reflection in the so-called global classroom. This model promotes critical thinking, social awareness and a positive view of self and others (Gladwell et al. 2016). Within Ignatian pedagogy, the process of teaching and learning follows a continuous learning cycle with five distinct stages (Context, Experience, Reflection, Action, and Evaluation). These steps are embedded in each unit of the programme, with the intent to promote critical thinking and leadership skills and achieve the ultimate goal of Ignatian pedagogy, as stated by Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ: forming men and women for others. The Diploma in Liberal Studies is composed of 15 courses, each equivalent to 3 US credits, and delivered in a blended-learning mode for 8 weeks where the students work individually on the online material and meet weekly or bi-weekly to discuss with peers and with a learning facilitator, in a local community learning centre (CLC). The online content is hosted on the Georgetown University platform and online professors are recruited by JWL to support the students online, who study in a global classroom, give them feedback on their work and grade their assignments.

Over the years, the Diploma in Liberal Studies has become a very successful programme delivered in 13 learning centres across 8 countries: Afghanistan (Bamyan rural centre and Herat urban centre), Jordan (Amman urban refugee centre), Iraq (Domiz Refugee Camp and Khanke Internally Displaced Persons Camp, Erbil urban centre), Malawi (Dzaleka Refugee Camp), Sri Lanka (urban centres), Kenya (Kakuma Refugee Camp), Myanmar (urban centre), and Zambia (remote rural town).
3 The Locations

This section briefly presents the sites where the 136 graduates who participated in the research studied.

**Kakuma Refugee Camp** is situated in a semi-arid area in the North of Kenya, near the South Sudanese and Ugandan border. It is the second oldest and longstanding refugee camp established in 1992 hosting refugees from all the conflicts around Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, South Sudan and the Great Lakes region. With more than 150,000 refugees mainly from South Sudan and Somalia, it is the second biggest refugee camp in Kenya. JWL started to implement the pilot online programme in Kakuma Camp in 2010, offering the Diploma in Liberal Studies in collaboration with Regis University. Back then it was a challenge to provide internet access at the learning centre. Students had to cover long distances on foot in order to get to the centre, proving resilience and commitment to use this unique opportunity for higher education. By end of 2020, 195 students graduated from the programme. Many of them are still in the camp, while others have been resettled or returned home.

**Dzaleka Refugee Camp**, just forty kilometres outside the Malawian capital city Lilongwe, was the second pilot site for the Diploma in Liberal Studies (also starting in 2010). The internet connection was less of a challenge, than in Kakuma Refugee Camp. The camp dates back to 1995 and was set up in a former high security prison. When the refugees from Mozambique returned home, the new refugees from conflicts in the Great Lakes region were hosted in Dzaleka. From 1,000 habitants at that time, it developed to a camp – akin to a rural city of mud houses, hosting over 30,000 refugees mainly from Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the early days, the partner organisation, JRS (Jesuit Refugee Service), brought books to the camp and since they did not have yet permission to enter the camp, the books were thrown over the fence, being picked up by refugees who built up a small library in boxes in the dormitory. A real library building followed sometime later. Some groups met to discuss great philosophical ideas. Their hunger for higher education was always there – and JWL could make this dream a reality. Having around 200 young adults in a community following their courses every day, connecting with the rest of the world, changes the outlook in their lives and the life of the whole community.

**Amman in Jordan** became the third pilot programme location. It had originally begun in Aleppo, Syria, where the last English language session was held by candlelight in Spring 2012. The programme was closed soon after the war reached Aleppo. The Jesuit Centre in Amman became the new host for a new programme which began in Autumn of 2012. Internet and infrastructure were not problematic but urban life is expensive, in particular transport for refugees to come to the centre. JWL students came from Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sudan and Somalia. To this day, JWL students in Amman are the most diverse learning community. They see it as their family – a family of different religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. People who were forced to flee their countries of origin, find their new home and family in the JWL learning community, and a new way of thinking.

**Bamyan and Herat in Afghanistan** saw new JWL community learning centres open in 2015. Bamyan is a small town in the central mountainous part of Afghanistan where the two renowned big
statues of Buddha were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. Just 300 m from the one cave, where the female Buddha was overseeing the high planes of Bamyan between two mountains ranges of 5,000 m peaks, is where the JWL learning centre is located (run by JRS, as local partner). Students came as far as one-day journey from the neighbouring Daikundi Province, to be able to attend the English Language programme and join the higher education programme. The first graduates of the Diploma in Liberal Studies returned to their villages in the Daikundi and Gore Provinces and opened new learning centres (with support from the local administration and JWL), teaching English and now enabling some to do professional and academic courses with JWL. The programme is translating itself into benefits for many youth and communities which are very open to education for boys and for girls. The Hazara (Shia Muslims) communities in Afghanistan greatly value education. Many of them were refugees in Pakistan and Iran, as they are targeted by the Taliban. As in Bamyan, many students at the Herat learning centre (JWL computer rooms are hosted at the Herat Technical Institute) belong to the Hazara community.

Iraq became a more recent focus of JWL, from the end of 2016. The Syrian war and then ISIS’ invasion of the Sinjar mountain, Mosul and the plane of Nineveh, displaced hundreds of thousands of Syrians, Yezidis and Iraqi Christians who found protection in the refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the cities of Dohuk and Erbil. JWL began with a small learning centre in Domiz Camp – in two containers – and one group of students meeting at the Catholic University in Erbil. In Khanke Camp (hosting over 20,000 Yezidis), the English Language programme was first programme on offer, later followed by the higher education programme. The JWL community in Iraq includes all religious and cultural communities – Syrians, Muslims, Yezidis and Iraqi Christians. The first graduates in Erbil (2019) moved back to their hometowns and like their colleagues in Afghanistan opened two JWL Community Learning Centres in Qaraqosh and Bartella (Christian communities). Likewise, students and first graduates of the Yezidi community in Khanke Camp moved back to their hometown in Sinjar and opened a new community learning centre to continue their own studies and to reach out to the youth of a very deprived and traumatised community.
4. Methodology

The methodological underpinnings of this research are based on a participatory approach (Hall, 1992) nurturing transformation. First of all, we held a participatory workshop with students, graduates, onsite and online facilitators, centre and country coordinators and headquarters staff, to collaboratively reflect on what impact is and how we define it within JWL, in terms of personal transformation (self-perception and behaviour) and communal change. The impact dimensions identified in the workshop are summarised in Fig 2.

**Figure 2: Participatory workshop’s outcome**

In order for the research team to develop an interview protocol, the 30 workshop participants were asked to rank the identified dimensions. The following 6 dimensions were selected as the most important: critical thinking, leadership, empowerment, self-confidence, sense of community, and intercultural and interreligious sensitivity.

This collaborative work formed the basis to elaborate the semi-structured interview protocol, that was structured as such:

- An initial section to unpack what happened in graduates’ lives after the Diploma.
- A section digging into the learning journey and the changes it produces.
- A section unpacking the 6 identified dimensions, focused on capturing how the graduates define these dimensions and concrete examples in their lives.
- A section exploring the societal impact and the involvement in the community of the graduates.
A section to capture the dimensions they deem the most important in terms of impact in their lives.

A final section trying to identify any possible negative, undesired impact that the Diploma had in the lives of the graduates and their communities.

In line with JWL’s transformational approach to research, this project was an opportunity to work on the capacity building of JWL graduates, and so we selected research assistants in Dzaleka refugee camp (Malawi), Kakuma Refugee Camp (Kenya), Amman (Jordan), and Afghanistan to conduct interviews with their fellow graduates. The research assistants attended a 1-day online training on data collection and research ethics and the international research team met once a week to report progresses and challenges, but also to create a peer-learning environment, leading to the creation of a community of practice over the two-months of data collection (September and October 2020). The interview protocol was piloted in Iraq in August 2020, and then refined by the research assistants, who interviewed one another to get used to the interview process.

Table 1 shows the number of graduates and of interviewees for each location.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>JWL site</th>
<th># interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Bamyan</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Herat</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Duhok</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Erbil</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Amman</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Kakuma</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>Dzaleka</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Interviews by location

Thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011) was used to analyse the data. The thematic coding process was conducted with the help of the software Dedoose1. After each

Figure 3: Interviewer and interviewee in September 2020
The interview was transcribed by the global research assistant team, they were uploaded to Dedoose to be coded and further analysed. The codes were developed based on a thematic approach, using a top-down - bottom-up cyclical process. For the first few interviews, main themes were noted down on a separate piece of paper in order to isolate the main categories of codes. After listening to few interviews, the coding structure was created in Dedoose until all identified themes were fully represented. Additional themes were identified over the courses of the analysis and were later included, whenever there was a new salient dimension that emerged from the data. The analysis had a total of 117 codes, with 10 main categories, 108 parent codes, and up to three sub-level categories of codes.

Once the data was coded, an analysis of the percentages reflecting how many times the selected code was applied to excerpts of the interview transcriptions was drawn. The analysis used a normalised dataset which allows mitigating the differences in numbers of interviews per country and gender and it also included sub-code count. The analysis of the code application was elaborated for the gender and country perspective. Whenever codes revealed a clear and meaningful pattern, we used this analysis to support findings from aggregate quote analysis. To structure the report, each key dimension was built based on the analysis of quotes of the relevant codes referring to this dimension. When selecting the quotes to include in the presentation of the findings, we aimed to keep a representation of all the sites in which interviews were conducted.

There were two main limitations to the research design. First, given that interviews were conducted by JWL staff (the Global Research Team), participants may have felt unable to fully express themselves, and to report possible negative impacts of the Diploma in their lives. Additionally, another potential bias may have emerged from the presence of different interviewers. Although all the interviewers had the same training, certain interviewers had a different approach to some questions, which resulted in emphasising some aspects more than others.

Among the 136 interviews conducted, 93 interviewees were males (68%) and 43 were females (32%). While males were overall more represented, there were more female participants than males in Afghanistan and in Iraq. This trend is in line with the gender distribution of the overall population of graduates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Participants’ gender by country

Most participants (69%) are refugees or former refugees now resettled. Again, this is in line with the overall Diploma graduate’s population, with the two largest and oldest centres offering the Diploma being in Kakuma and Dzaleka refugee camps.
In the following weeks, we will present the results of this one-year project which aimed at understanding the impact of the Diploma in Liberal Studies in the lives of its graduates and their communities, listening to their voices and unpacking how the key dimensions of impact identified by JWL were mobilised, lived, and understood. We will do so by presenting each element of the conceptual framework that was develop from the analysis the interviews (Fig 4), one at a time. The framework is based on the concepts of savoir (knowledge), savoir-faire (skills) and savoir-être (attitudes – or, as they are called in the Common European Framework of Reference and will be called in this report: existential competences) (Brühlmeier, 2010). It relates the acquisition of these competences to the development of empowerment, both in terms of individual empowerment and in terms of empowerment of communities and shows the relation between competences and empowerment at each stage of the process. The framework also highlights the intersection between the self and others, by articulating the reciprocal relationship that nurtures these two kinds of empowerment.

Chapter 1 investigates savoir and savoir-faire (knowledge and skills) acquired during the Diploma, identified by the graduates as the most important ones in terms of the impact they had in their lives. The chapter will review soft and hard skills (Baartman & De Bruijn, 2011) reported by graduates and explore the opportunities that taking part in the Diploma gave to graduates in terms of access to higher education, network and professionalism. The chapter concludes with what it meant for graduates to gain these knowledge and skills, in terms of personal growth.

Chapter 2 focuses on critical thinking, a skill, or as Rubenfeld & Scheffer (2014) define it, a habit of mind, at the core of JWL (and Jesuit) education. The graduates articulated this habit of mind and unpack what sharpening their critical thinking means for them: strengthening their analysis and evaluation skills, their approach to problem-solving, their capability to adapt and act autonomously. From the accounts of their experiences, it is clear that critical thinking is the skill enabling graduates to unlock their potential to nurture key existential competences (savoir-être) that are employed in their daily lives, transforming the acquired knowledge into action: leadership, intercultural and interreligious sensitivity and sense of community, which are the focus of the following 3 chapters.
Chapter 3 unpacks how leadership is defined and lived by graduates. Leadership, and in particular Servant Leadership (Lavin, 2018) is at the core of Jesuit education and a pivotal learning element of the Diploma in Liberal Studies. This approach to leadership can be summarised by the motto “men and women for others” (Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ). The chapter explores what graduates define as good and bad leadership, and how leadership is important for the self and for others. They explain how the concept of Servant Leadership experienced in the Diploma is enacted in their daily life. Finally, they reflect on the skills and values that come with a Servant Leadership approach.

Chapter 4 delves into an existential competence very dear to JWL and actively nurtured by its educational model, through the global-classroom component: interreligious and intercultural sensitivity. In the chapter, we discuss the various levels of tolerance and respect articulated by the graduates by mobilising Bennet’s model (2004); the chapter then zooms in to capture the reflection of the graduates on how the Diploma programme and the JWL educational model support the development of this competence. Finally, it sheds light on the impact – the results of acquiring this competence to contribute to the creation of more peaceful communities.

Chapter 5 presents the last existential competence identified in the conceptual framework: sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In the chapter, the voices of the graduates guide us on the how they engage in their communities and what reasons are compel them to be involved as agents of change; reasons related to the values developed during their Diploma journey.

The last two chapters explore how this enriching journey becomes transformational by nurturing a sense of empowerment of the self (Chapter 6) and by enabling the graduates to empower their communities, through their engagement (Chapter 7). Chapter 6 provides accounts of how the graduates gained self-empowerment through the Diploma journey and what the effects of being empowered are in terms of personal development. Chapter 7 presents graduates’ reflections on the effects and changes that this nurtured sense of community and graduates’ personal empowerment bring to the people living in their communities and, therefore, how the communities are transformed and empowered.
6 References


7 Authors

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